

BREASTPLATE  
*of the*  
HIGH PRIEST

By  
C. C. HUNT

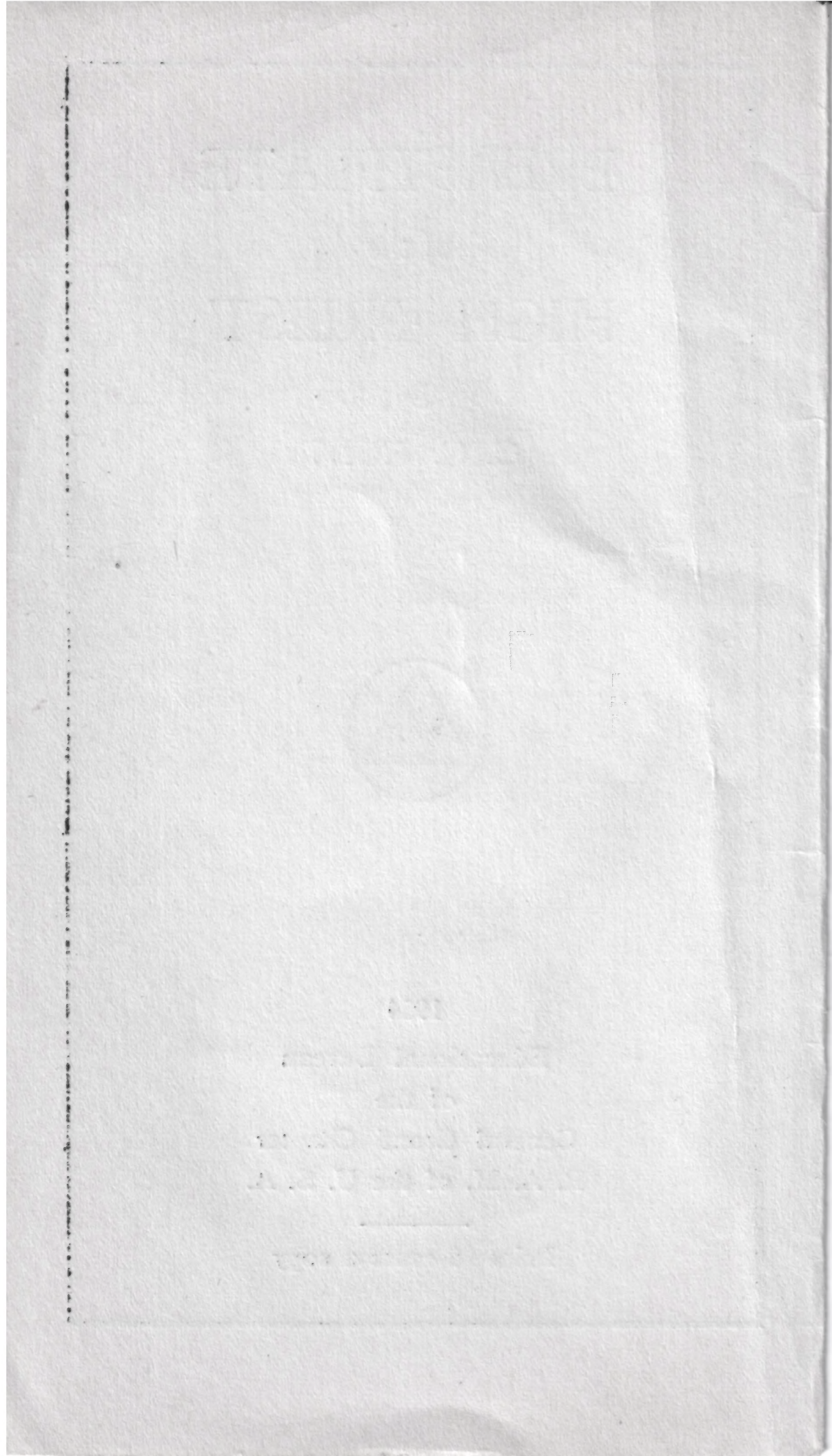


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# BREASTPLATE of the HIGH PRIEST

By C. C. HUNT, P. G. H. P.

**A**T the installation of a High Priest to preside over his Chapter, he is invested with a Breastplate and told that it is in imitation of that upon which were engraved the names of the twelve tribes and worn by the High Priest of Israel.

Since the directions for making the breastplate are given in detail in Ex. 28:15-30 and 29:8-21, it ought to be easy to describe, but in attempting to do so we soon run into difficulties, chiefly because authorities differ in their interpretation of the Hebrew words used in the Scriptural description as names of the twelve gems to represent the twelve tribes of Israel.

Aside from the gems, the Biblical description is sufficiently clear. The breastplate was to be made of the same material as the Ephod, namely, "of gold, of blue, and purple, and of scarlet, and fine twined linen." "It was foursquare; they made the breastplate double: a span was the length thereof, and a span the breadth thereof, being double." Thus before it was doubled it would be about eighteen inches long by nine wide. After being doubled it formed a square on the face of which were set four rows of precious stones, three in each row and on each stone was engraved the name of one of the twelve tribes of Israel.



In reading the Biblical description of these stones we must remember that the Hebrews read from right to left, so when we read in Ex. 39:10, "A row of sardius, topaz, and carbuncle was the first row," they would appear on the breastplate in the order "carbuncle, topaz, sardius."

Therefore, if we follow the description given in Exodus 39:10-13, as given in the English Bible, the stones in the breastplate would be in the following positions:

3 Carbuncle	2 Topaz	1 Sardius
6 Diamond	5 Sapphire	4 Emerald
9 Amethyst	8 Agate	7 Ligure
12 Jasper	11 Onyx	10 Beryl

However, many Masonic authorities prefer the Vulgate translation which is also given in the margin of English Bibles. The difference is caused by a difference of opinion as to the proper translation of the Hebrew words for each stone. According to the Latin Vulgate the positions were:

3 Emerald	2 Topaz	1 Sardius
6 Jasper	5 Sapphire	4 Carbuncle
9 Amethyst	8 Agate	7 Ligure
12 Beryl	11 Onyx	10 Chrysolite

The Bible tells us that each stone represented a tribe of Israel, but does not state the order in which the names of the tribes were placed on the breastplate. According to the Jewish Targums the order was as follows:



3 Levi	2 Simeon	1 Reuben
6 Zebulum	5 Issachar	4 Judah
9 Gad	8 Naphtali	7 Dan
12 Benjamin	11 Joseph	10 Asher

According to the Jewish Rabbis, each stone had the name of one of the tribes engraved upon it, in order that, when the High Priest, wearing the breastplate, came before God, he might remember the children descended from the Patriarch whose names they bore. No chisel or engraving tool was permitted to touch the gems, nor could the names be placed thereon with paint or ink. The stones were engraved by Moses by means of the worm Shamir, which being placed on the gems in the form of letters cut those letters into the stone.

Both Jewish and Masonic legends say that this worm was also used by Solomon to shape the stones for the Temple so that it was not necessary to make use of axe, hammer or any iron tool.

In an old Royal Arch Ritual, which is thought to have come from the Grand Lodge of the Moderns, this worm was used to shape the "Wonderful Stone Altar called Ashelo" (Agate) which was placed in the secret vault and which was made "in imitation of the grand and sacred Ark."

The word "Shamir" appears three times in the Hebrew Bible. In Jeremiah 17:1, where it is translated "diamond" and in Ezekiel 3:9, and Zechariah 7:12 where it is translated "adamant."

The Jewish High Priest wore the Breastplate with its twelve stones representing the twelve tribes of Israel that in his offerings to God he might remember the interests and welfare of the children of



Israel. The High Priest of a Chapter wears it to teach him that he is always to bear in mind his responsibilities to the laws and ordinances of Masonry and that the honor and interests of his Chapter and its members should always be near his heart.

Many writers have tried to determine the identity of the stones named in Exodus 28 and 39 in the breastplate of the High Priest. There is no difference of opinion as to the Hebrew words but authorities do not agree as to the particular stone which is meant by each Hebrew word. Let us consider them in order using English letters to spell the Hebrew words for each stone.

1. **Odem.** This designates a red stone of some kind, possibly the carnelian. The Greek Septuagint, the Latin Vulgate, and others translate it "sardius." Josephus sometimes translates it "sardius" and at other times "sardonyx." The Hebrew word literally means "a flesh-colored stone" and it is sometimes translated "ruby," and sometimes "garnet." The name of Reuben is said to have been engraved on this stone, the first one on the breastplate.

Th uncertainty as to its identity, its varying tints of red and purple, made it a fitting symbol of Reuben, the unstable, whose father Jacob, on his death bed said of him: "Reuben, thou art my first-born, unstable as water thou shalt not excel." Thus the uncertain sardius is a fitting symbol of the vacillating Reuben.

2. **Pitdah.** Some writers say this stone of greenish hue streaked with yellow, referred to the chrysolite or topaz, and others translate it "sapphire." Pliny said it was first found on an island in the



Red Sea called Topazos, from "topazein," meaning "to conjecture," because it was hard to find. More likely, however, the Hebrew "pitdah" was derived from the Sanskrit, "pita," "yellow." This stone was assigned to Simeon.

3. **Bareketh.** Authorities disagree as to whether this was the green emerald or the fiery red carbuncle. At any rate the carbuncle more fittingly represents the fiery Levi, whose name is said to have been engraved on this stone. Simeon and Levi, nearly always mentioned together in Scripture, were men of violence and cruelty. Jacob said of them: "Cursed be their anger, for it was fierce, and their wrath for it was cruel; I will divide them in Jacob and scatter them in Israel." The ancients considered the carbuncle a heart stimulant and wearers were warned to be on their guard against attacks of apoplexy since it tended to render them passionate and angry. It also signified blood and suffering.

4. **Nophek.** This is often interchanged with No. 3, above. Authorities who translate "bareketh" as "emerald" call "nophek" "carbuncle," and vice-versa. However, the symbolism of the carbuncle fits the character of Levi, and that of the emerald, Judah, whose name is said to have been engraved on the fourth stone.

The emerald was said to foreshadow future events, and endow its wearer with a supernatural knowledge of the future. Since it was a revealer of truth it was an enemy of enchantments and magic. Therefore it was feared by magicians, who found themselves powerless, in its presence, to weave their spells. Cardano, an Italian Mathematician of the 16th Century, said that the emerald



sharpens the wits and quickens the intelligence, and that, therefore, it made people more honest, for, "dishonesty is nothing but ignorance, stupidity, and ill-nature." This stone was represented in the breastplate by Judah around whom so much prophecy centered, "Judah, the brave, indomitable Judah, whose standard was ever in the advance and whose war cry was the terror of the enemies of Israel." His father Jacob said of him:

"Judah, thee shall thy brethren praise: thy hand shall be on the neck of thine enemies: Thy father's sons shall bow down before thee.

"Judah is a lion's whelp. From the prey, my son, thou art gone up: he stooped down, he couched as a lion, and as a lioness: who shall rouse him up?

"The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until Shiloh come."

5. **Sappir.** This is usually translated "sapphire" though some authorities give "jasper" or "lapis lazuli." George F. Kunz in his "The Curious Lore of Precious Stones," page 293, says of it:

This is rendered **sapphirus** in all the old versions. The stone cannot have been our sapphire, for both Theophrastus and Pliny describe the **sapphirus** as a stone with golden spots, thus showing that they meant the lapis-lazuli, which is often spotted with particles of pyrites having a golden sheen. This stone was named **chesbet** by the Egyptians, and was highly prized by them, a quantity of lapis-lazuli often appearing as an important item in the lists of tribute paid to Egypt and among the gifts sent by Babylonia to the Egyptian monarchs, and obtained from the oldest mines in the world. These were worked at a period 4000 B. C. and still are worked to this day. From this material amulets and figures were made, many of which have been preserved for us, and the Egyptian high-priest is said to have worn, suspended from his neck, an



image of Mat, the Goddess of Truth, made of lapis-lazuli. The name is composed of the Latin *lapis*, "a stone," and *lajuward*, the name of the stone in Persian. From this latter word is also derived our "azure." In ancient times the lapis-lazuli was the blue stone *par excellence*, because of its beautiful color and the valuable ultramarine dye derived from it. Although Pliny writes (xxxvii, 39) that this stone was too soft for engraving, this fact need not have prevented its use in the breastplate, since the stones set therein were not intended for use as seals and hence were not subjected to any wear. In this connection, however, it is somewhat strange that the Hebrew word *sappir* appears to indicate a stone especially adapted to receive inscriptions. The fact that the lapis-lazuli was greatly esteemed in ancient Egypt, and was still much used as an ornamental stone in Greek and Roman times, renders it probable that it was set not only in the original breastplate, but also in that of a later age. Upon this fifth stone the name Issachar was inscribed.

According to Jewish tradition it was on tables of this stone, "sappir" that the Law was engraved by the finger of God and then given to Moses.

Issachar, whose name appeared on this stone, is described by his father as "a strong ass," who "bowed his shoulder to bear, and became a servant under taskwork."

6. **Yahalom.** The Authorized and Revised Versions of the Bible translate this "diamond," but the Revised Version gives "sardonyx" in the margin. Josephus gives "sapphire" and the Vulgate, "jasper," while the Greek Version has it "onyx."

The Hebrew word "yahalom" comes from a verb which means "to smite" and the stone denotes "the smiter." For this reason the English Bible calls it the diamond, which is so hard that it cuts or "smites" all other stones. However, the engraved



onyx was often used as a seal and as thus used could be said "to smite" the wax or other soft material on which the impression of the seal was made.

The name of Zebulon, the mariner, was engraved on this stone. Jacob said of him: "Zebulon shall dwell at the haven of the sea; and he shall be for a haven of ships, and his border shall be upon Sidon." In the pursuit of his calling he might be said to smite the sea with the oars of his ships.

7. Leshem. This stone has been variously translated, "ligure," jacinth," "chrysolite," "sapphire," etc. Kunz says of it:

No stone in the breastplate is more difficult to determine than this one. The Septuagint, Josephus, and the Vulgate all translate *ligurius*, an appellation sometimes applied to amber, a substance quite unfitted for use in the breastplate among the other engraved stones. Probably the original significance of *ligurius* was amber, this name being used because Liguria, in northern Italy, was the chief source of supply for Greece and the Orient; amber which had been gathered on the shores of the Baltic being brought by traders to Liguria and forwarded thence to other lands. As, however, the Greeks had another name for amber, *electron*, the name *ligurion* appears to have been applied later to a variety of the jacinth somewhat resembling amber in color, and then to other varieties of the same stone. The original form of the name was evidently *ligurion*, which was later changed to *lyncurion*, and was then explained as meaning the urine of the lynx. This fanciful etymology gave rise to the story that the *ligurios*, or rather *lyncurius*, was the solidified urine of the lynx. The term *lyncurion*, as used by Theophrastus, may possibly have included the sapphire as well as the jacinth, since he lays especial stress upon the coldness of this substance, a quality characteristic of the sapphire, and also of the still denser jacinth.



Hence, it appears that we have, even in the name *ligurius*, some justification for accepting the rendering *hyacinthus*, suggested by the list of foundation stones in Revelation xxi, 20, and already proposed by Epiphanius, Bishop of Constantia, about 400 A. D. Whether *hyacinthus* should be rendered "sapphire" or "jacinth" is not easy to determine, as this name seems to have been used indifferently for both stones; with the Arabs, under the form *yakut*, it became a generic term for all the varieties of the corundum gems. The sapphire was engraved in Greek and Roman times and is, perhaps, the *leshem* stone of the Second Temple. For the Mosaic breastplate we are forced to seek for some stone known in ancient Egypt, where the sapphire does not seem to have been introduced at an early date. If we could accept the suggestion of Brugsch that the Egyptian *neshem* stone, reputed to have wonderful magic virtues, was the same as the Hebrew *leshem*, a brown agate would have been the seventh stone in the original breastplate, as Wendel gives very strong reasons for rendering *neshem* in this way. The color designations were very freely used in Egyptian, and therefore a reddish or a yellowish brown agate may have been used.

The name of Dan was inscribed on the "*leshem*." Dan, who was to "judge his people as one of the tribes of Israel."

8. *Shebo*. Usually translated "agate" though Josephus calls it the "*amethyst*." This was a composite stone much esteemed by the ancients. It represented the tribe of Naphtali, whose disposition was so gentle that he was likened to a "hind let loose." This tribe was distinguished by mild men and beautiful women. The Mother of Hiram Abif belonged to the tribe of Naphtali. The composite nature of the agate made it a fitting representative of the culture and manifold accomplishments of the people of Naphtali.



9. **Ahlamah.** Most authorities translate this "amethyst" though some think it was a kind of agate, different from No. 8.

The word comes from the Hebrew "halom" meaning "dream," and the stone was thought to have the power to make its wearer dream. On this stone, the name of Gad was engraved, "Gad, a troop shall press upon him, but he shall press upon their heel."

This stone is said to have had the power to protect soldiers from injury and to make them victorious. This would make it an appropriate stone to represent Gad.

A French poem, written in 1576 and dedicated to Henri III, gives a pretty legend about the amethyst: it recites that "the god Bacchus, offended at some neglect that he had suffered, was determined to avenge himself, and declared that the first person he should meet, when he and his train passed along, should be devoured by his tigers. Fate willed it that this luckless mortal was a beautiful and pure maiden named Amethyst, who was on her way to worship at the shrine of Diana. As the ferocious beasts sprang toward her, she sought the protection of the goddess, and was saved from a worse fate by being turned into a pure white stone. Recognizing the miracle and repenting of his cruelty, Bacchus poured the juice of the grape as a libation over the petrified body of the maiden, thus giving to the stone the beautiful violet hue that so charms the beholder's eye."

10. **Tarshish.** The English Bible translates this "beryl" or "topaz" while the Septuagint and Josephus render it "chrysolite." One explanation of these differences is that the topaz of the ancients



was our chrysolite and vice-versa. The literal meaning of the word "tarshish" was "golden-stone." Kunz says of it:

The **tarshish** received its name from Tartessus, in Spain, an important commercial station of the Phoenicians. The stone derived from this source was not, of course, our Oriental topaz, a variety of corundum, nor was it the true topaz; neither is it at all likely that the name **tarshish** signified, at least originally, the genuine topaz; most probably it denoted a variety of quartz which occurs in Spain. This is originally black, but is decolorized by heating to a deep brown, and if the heating be prolonged the stone becomes paler and eventually entirely transparent. The ancients were familiar with this property. In ancient Egyptian records a stone called **thehen** is frequently mentioned as a material from which amulets were made. This Egyptian name signified primarily a "yellow stone," and might designate either the topaz or the yellow jasper, known and used in Egypt at a very early date; the topaz was probably not known there earlier than 500 or 600 B. C. Hence, in spite of the unquestionable difficulty offered by the geographical name **tarshish**, which might seem to confine us to a Spanish origin for the stone, the probabilities favor the selection of the yellow jasper as the tenth gem in Aaron's breastplate. For that made with pious zeal by those who labored to renew the glories of the Old Jerusalem, we choose the topaz,—possibly, indeed, a fine specimen of the genuine topaz,—for whatever the quality of the yellow stone originally brought from Tartessus, the name may well have been applied to the genuine topaz when that stone became known to the Jews, either in Babylonia, or after their return to Palestine.

The name of Asher was inscribed on this stone, a name little mentioned in Jewish history.

11. **Shoham**. Translated "onyx" by the English Bible, the Vulgate, and Josephus, while the Septua-



gint and the margin of the English Bible give it "beryl."

The onyx was believed to provoke discord and separate lovers. This would make it appropriate to Joseph, whose name was said to be engraved on the "shoham," for over him his brethren argued and finally sold him into slavery thus separating him from the father who loved him dearly. The close union and yet the strange contrast between the layers of black and white of the onyx may account for this belief.

As to the identity of this stone, Kunz says:

In our endeavor to determine the **shoham** stones used in Mosaic times, we have no very definite information to guide us; on the whole, the conjecture of J. L. Myers, that they were malachites, seems to have much in its favor, for this material was known to the ancient Egyptians and appears to have been often used for amulets. The Egyptian name for malachite, as well as for other green stones, was **mafek**, and a ring of **mafek** is mentioned in an Egyptian text; undoubtedly, at a later period in Egyptian history, **mafek** may also have denoted the beryl. In view of the fact that the turquoise was unquestionably known to the Egyptians at a very early date, the supply being derived from mines in the Sinai Peninsula, which were rediscovered by Macdonald, we might be tempted to suggest that the **shoham** stones were turquoises. The light blue or blue-green of the specimens of this stone found on Mt. Sinai would make an even better contrast with the neighboring jade than would the bright green malachite.

12. **Yashpneh**. Of this stone Kunz says:

If, as appears almost certain, this name originally occupied the sixth place in the original Hebrew text, all the ancient versions agree in translating it "jasper." An Assyrian form of the name was **yashpu**, as is shown by the Tell el Amarna letters in the cuneiform writing dating from not long



before the Exodus. Of all the so-called jaspers none were so highly valued as those of a green color. The talismanic and therapeutic qualities of the "green jaspers" are often noted by ancient writers, and, according to Galem, these stones were recommended for remedial use by Egyptian writers on medicine. Abel Remusat, the great French Orientalist, writing in 1820, was one of the first to see in the *yashpneh* of the Hebrews and in the green jasper of the Greeks and Romans, the material jade (nephrite or jadeite), the Chinese *yu-stone*. These minerals were used both in the Old and the New World, and were everywhere believed to possess wonderful virtues. Very likely the powers supposed to characterize jade were later attributed to green jasper, but there is every reason to suppose that the true jade was always more highly prized than its jasper substitute, for it was much rarer, and was easily distinguishable, by its translucency, from jasper of a similar color. Until quite recently only Turkestan, Burma and New Zealand have supplied jade and most of that used in other lands came from prehistoric relics or from sources unknown to us. It seems highly probable that the *yashpneh* which adorned the breastplate made for Aaron was a piece of nephrite or jadeite; possibly in the later breastplate green jasper may have been employed.

The name of Benjamin was inscribed on this stone.

He was the father of a warlike tribe, which was frequently associated with that of Judah in martial activities. Of him Jacob said: "Benjamin is a wolf that raveneth: in the morning he shall devour the prey, and at even he shall devour the spoil."

Speaking of Jacob's last words to his sons, Alexander H. Morgan, P. G. H. P. of Pennsylvania, said:

It will be noticed as worthy of comment, that even in those last and critical moments of the



Patriarch Jacob, with the burden of seven-score years and the shadow of death hovering over him, that the strength of character, the keenness of intellect, which always had been his distinguishing traits, still survived the physical decay of old age. And in the after ages, when his descendants had grown and become a great nation, that on the breastplate of judgment the High Priest of Israel wore the names of those twelve sons who stood around the couch and listened to the predictions of their father as to the future of themselves and their descendants.

Companions, many of the Royal Arch Masons present have worn the breastplate of a High Priest, but few have given a thought to its significance or the sacred character of its symbolism. When we remember that this part of the vestments of a Jewish High Priest was first worn in the Tabernacle set up in the wilderness more than four thousand years ago, and the arrangement of the precious stones, with the inscriptions upon them, made under the instructions of the Deity, we are fully justified in claiming for the breastplate a sacred origin.

Commenting on the symbolism of the stones in the breastplate, he said:

In continuing the study of the stones of the breastplate, we come to their popular significance, which will be found to be as interesting and much more general than those relating to the twelve tribes. In the commercial sense they are known as gems, and as such have their special values. Poets often get their inspiration from gems. They have their peculiar language. Love, friendship, hatred, good or bad fortune—all those feelings and passions are popularly supposed to be bound up and connected with gems. Superstitions of many kinds, witchcraft, the study of alchemy, the myth of the philosopher's stone, whose touch would convert the baser metals into gold, are among the numerous attributes of those masses of crystallized matter called gems.



"Full many a gem of purest ray serene  
The dark, unfathomed caves of ocean bear;  
Full many a flower is born to blush unseen  
And waste its sweetness on the desert air."

How our poet learned that the unfathomed caves of the ocean bear many "gems of purest ray serene" is an unsolved problem; but those parts of the human family enjoy what is known as a poetical license, and are privileged to make statements which are not to be too closely scrutinized. I will not tire the patience of the Companions by going through all the popular significance of the twelve stones of the breastplate, but will select several of the most prominent, beginning with the diamond.

Who does not in his heart of hearts admire the queen of all gems, the diamond? And yet it is the emblem of the much decried human passion, pride—pride, the antagonist of the meek and lowly; pride, that turns from suffering humanity and steels itself against the appeal of meek-eyed charity.

As a Masonic symbol, we should reject the diamond; but we find Masonic jewels, especially those given as testimonials at the close of an official term, decorated with diamonds. It is a modern innovation and of questionable propriety.

But then the diamond has its redeeming qualities, and is said to possess the power of insuring constancy between lovers and of restoring alienated man and wife—which may be the cause of its popularity for engagement rings.

A doubting lover who saw a diamond in the head-dress of his mistress gives vent to his thoughts in the following lines:

"The diamond blazing in thy hair  
Thy emblem meet may be;  
Thou lack'st a jewel far more rare—  
Meek-eyed humility."

To the sardius or ruby is ascribed qualities opposite to the diamond, and consequently it is commendable to the Freemason. This gem is the



proper adornment of the hero, whose noble nature prompts him to battle in the cause of injured innocence, and he is supposed to be decorated with the sardius or ruby by the fair being he has rescued.

"Only the brave deserve the fair."

The sapphire, the emblem of innocence, is the foe of envy and deceit, and she who wears it is protected from the wiles of the seducer. A serpent cannot look upon a sapphire; so that if Eve had worn this gem when confronted with the serpent, mankind would have been spared a lot of trouble.

There is a tradition that the vision which appeared to Moses on the mount was in a sapphire, and that the tablets of the law were engraved on this substance: so that the sapphire is among the most important of all the gems which adorn the breastplate of a High Priest.

The emerald was a favorite with the ancients. It was said to possess great healing powers in many diseases, especially in curing weakness of sight. It would also detect a false witness by changing color in his presence. Successful lovers wore the emerald as a token that the fair sex was kind to them.

This gem, when of pure, faultless color, is prized as equal to and even of more value than the diamond. There is an oriental superstition that the gate opening into the seventh Mohammedan heaven was an immense emerald; hence the color of the green banner of the Prophet.

The amethyst, the ninth gem of the breastplate, next claims our attention. The word "amethyst" is derived from a Greek word meaning "preventing intoxication." It was worn as a charm by the ancients to defend them from the bad effects of too much indulgence in the wine cup, and consequently was a favorite gem of the worshipers of Bacchus.

The topaz was the symbol of fidelity, and as such commends itself to the Master Mason. It was held in much esteem by the Greek and Roman warriors. When the Greeks set forth under Agamemnon for the rescue of Helen and the Destruction of Troy, each leader was presented with a shield bearing on



its front a topaz, and it was accepted as a pledge of fidelity to the cause in which they were engaged.

The opal is an evil gem, supposed to bring misfortune to the wearer. "Present your enemy with an opal, and you are certain to be avenged for real or fancied injuries." But even an opal has redeeming qualities. The wearer will never be struck by lightning.

The jasper or bloodstone, with many suppositious qualities, pertains to the month of March, and yet its attributes are not of the stormy character. The jasper is the symbol of love and faithfulness. Those born in the month of March should wear the bloodstone; it will endow them with courage. And if a girl, she should also wear violets, the combination insuring constancy. "The bloodstone was employed by the early Christians for the engraving of sacred subjects, figures being so arranged that the red spots should represent drops of blood."

The breastplate of the High Priest of Israel was indeed regarded by the Jews with peculiar reverence and the gems which bedecked it were emblematical of many traits of human nature. Kunz says of it:

Very early, and very naturally, the religious nature of man led to the use of precious stones in connection with worship—the most valuable and elegant objects being chosen for sacred purposes. Of this mode of thought, we have a striking instance in the accounts given, in the book of Exodus, of the breastplate of the High-priest, and the gems contributed for the tabernacle by the Israelites in the wilderness. Another religious association of such objects is their use to symbolize ideas of the Divine glory, as illustrated in the visions of the prophet Ezekiel and in the description of the New Jerusalem in the book of Revelation. Apart from such legitimate uses, however, gems have become associated with all manner of religious fancies, and superstitions, traces of which appear in the Talmud, the Koran, and similar writings; they have also



been dedicated to various heathen deities. Even in modern times, some trace of the same ideas remains in the ecclesiastical jewelry and its supposed symbolism.

In the vision of Ezekiel i, 26, and in a brief allusion to the similar appearance of the God of Israel in Exodus xxiv, the throne of Jehovah, or the pavement beneath his feet, is compared to a sapphire, and the Apostle John, in the Apocalypse, describes the Great White Throne as surrounded by a rainbow like an emerald.

The Rabbinical writings, instead of the simple grandeur of these biblical comparisons, give us many fanciful ideas. The stones of the breastplate are here represented as sacred to twelve mighty angels who guard the gates of Paradise, and wondrous tales are told of the luminous gems in the tent of Abraham and the ark of Noah. Mohammedan legend represents the different heavens as composed of different precious stones, and in the Middle Ages these religious ideas became interwoven with a host of astrological, alchemistic, and medical superstitions.

Of the miraculous quality of the stones worn by the high priest, the Jewish historian Josephus (37-95 A. D.) says :

From the stones which the high-priest wore (these were sardonyxes, and I hold it superfluous to describe their nature, since it is known to all), there emanated a light, as often as God was present at the sacrifices ; that which was worn on the right shoulder instead of a clasp emitting a radiance sufficient to give light even to those far away, although the stone previously lacked this splendor. And certainly this in itself merits the wonder of all those who do not, out of contempt for religion, allow themselves to be led away by a pretence of wisdom. However, I am about to relate something still more wonderful, namely, that God announced victory in battle by means of the twelve stones worn by the high-priest on his breast, set in the pectoral. For such a splendor shone from



them when the army was not yet in motion, that all the people knew that God himself was present to aid them. For this reason the Greeks who reverence our solemnities, since they could not deny this, called the pectoral oracle. However, the pectoral and the onyxes ceased to emit this radiance two hundred years before the time when I write this, because God was displeased at the transgressions of the Law.

This writer, who must have seen the high-priest wearing his elaborate vestments, says, that the breastplate was adorned "with twelve stones of exceptional size and beauty, a decoration not easily to be acquired, on account of its enormous value." However, these gems were not merely rare and costly; they also possessed wonderful and miraculous powers. Writing about 400 A. D., St. Epiphanius, Bishop of Constantia, tells of a marvellous *adamas* which was worn on the breast of the high-priest, who showed himself to the people, arrayed in all his gorgeous vestments, at the feasts of Pascha, Pentecost, and Tabernacles. This *adamas* was termed the "Declaration," because, by its appearance, it announced to the people the fate that God had in store for them. If the people were sinful and disobedient, the stone assumed a dusky hue, which portended death by disease, or else it became the color of blood, signifying that the people would be slain by the sword. If, however, the stone shone like the driven snow, then the people recognized that they had not sinned, and hastened to celebrate the festival.

There seems to be little doubt that this account is nothing more than an elaboration and modification of the passage in Josephus. Evidently the oracle of Josephus has become the declaration.

An argument against the use of especially rare and costly stones in the decoration of the breastplate has been found in its probable size. We are told that when folded it measured a span in each direction, and this would indicate that its length and breadth were each from eight to nine inches. In this case the stones themselves might have meas-



ured two by two and a half inches, and, in view of the number of characters required to express some of the tribal names, these dimensions do not seem excessive. It is highly improbable that in the time of Moses precious stones like the ruby, the emerald, or the sapphire would have been available in these dimensions. The difficulty of engraving very hard stones with the appliances at the command of the Hebrews of this period must also be taken into consideration. As we shall see, however, there is good reason to believe that after the Babylonian Captivity a new breastplate was made, and at that time it may have been easier to secure and work precious stones of great value and a high degree of hardness. We must also bear in mind that in those periods perfection was not so great a requisite as rich color.

In his commentary on Exodus xxviii, Cornelius à Lapide (Cornelius Van den Steen) discusses the question of the diamond in the high-priest's breastplate. In the first place, he notes that the diamond was very costly, and that a large stone would have been needed to bear the name of Judah or that of any other tribe. He considers that a stone of the requisite size would have cost a hundred thousand gold crowns, and he asks, "Whence could the poor Hebrews have obtained such a sum of money, and where could they have found such a diamond?" He proceeds to give still another reason for doubting that the diamond was in the breastplate,—namely, that it would have marked too great a distinction between the tribes, the result being that the tribe to which the diamond was assigned would have been puffed up with pride, while the others would have been filled with hatred and envy, "for the diamond is the Queen Gem of all the gems."

The use of the breastplate to reveal the guilt of an offender is testified to in a Samaritan version of the book of Joshua, which has been discovered by Dr. Moses Gaster, chief rabbi of the Spanish and Portuguese Jews in England. According to this version, Achan steals a golden image from a heathen temple in Jericho. The



high-priest's breastplate reveals his guilt, for the stones lose their light and grow dim when his name is pronounced.

Many conjectures have been made as to the origin of the breastplate with the mystic Urim and Thummim enclosed within it. That an Egyptian origin should be sought seems most probable. A breast-ornament worn by the high-priest of Memphis, as figured in an Egyptian Relief, consists of twelve small balls, or crosses, intended to represent Egyptian hieroglyphics. As it cannot be determined that these figures were cut from precious stones, the only definite connection with the Hebrew ornament is the number of the figures; this suggests, but fails to prove, a common origin. The monuments show that the high-priest of Memphis wore this ornament as early as the fourth Dynasty, or, approximately, 4000 B. C.

Of the Urim and Thummim, the mysterious oracle of the ancient Hebrews, St. Augustine (354-450 A. D.), after acknowledging the great difficulty of interpreting the meaning of the words and the character of the oracle, adds that some believed the words to signify a single stone which changed color according as the answer was favorable or unfavorable, while the priest was entering the sanctuary; still he thought it possible that merely the letters of the words Urim and Thummim were inscribed upon the breastplate.

After the capture of Jerusalem by Titus in 70 A. D., the treasures of the temple were carried off to Rome, and we learn from Josephus that the breastplate was deposited in the Temple of Concord, which had been erected by Vespasian. Here it is believed to have been at the time of the sacking of Rome by the Vandals under Genseric, in 455, although Rev. C. W. King thinks it is not improbable that Alaric, king of the Visigoths, when he sacked Rome in 410 A. D., might have secured this treasure. However, the express statement of Procopius that "the vessels of the Jews" were carried through the streets of Constantinople, on the occasion of the Vandalic triumph of Belisarius, in 534,



may be taken as a confirmation of the conjecture that the Vandals had secured possession of the breastplate and its jewels.

It must, however, be carefully noted that Procopius nowhere mentions the breastplate and that it need not have been included among "the vessels of the Jews." It appears that this part of the spoils of Belisarius was placed by Justinian (483-565) in the sacristy of the church of St. Sophia. Some time later, the emperor is said to have heard of the saying of a certain Jew to the effect that, until the treasures of the Temple were restored to Jerusalem, they would bring misfortune upon any place where they might be kept. If this story be true, Justinian may have felt that the fate of Rome was a lesson for him, and that Constantinople must be saved from a like disaster. Moved by such considerations, he is said to have sent the "sacred Vessels" to Jerusalem, and they were placed in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.

This brings us to the last two events which can be even plausibly connected with the mystic twelve gems,—namely, the capture and sack of Jerusalem by the Sassanian Persian king, *Khusrau II*, in 615, and the overthrow of the Sassanian Empire by the Mohammedan Arabs, and the capture and sack of Ctesiphon, in 637. If we admit that Khusrau took the sacred relics of the Temple with him to Persia, we may be reasonably sure that they were included among the spoils secured by the Arab conquerors, although King, who has ingeniously endeavored to trace out the history of the breastplate jewels after the fall of Jerusalem in 70 A. D., believes that they may still be "buried in some unknown treasure-chamber of one of the old Persian capitals."

A fact which has generally been overlooked by those who have embarked on the sea of conjecture relative to the fate of the breastplate stones is that a large Jewish contingent, numbering some twenty-six thousand men, formed part of the force with which the Sassanian Persians captured Jerusalem, and they might well lay claim to any Jewish ves-



sels or jewels that may have been secured by the conquerors. In this case, however, it is still probable that these precious objects fell into the hands of the Mohammedans who captured Jerusalem in the same year in which they took Ctesiphon.

One circumstance which may have contributed to the preservation of these gems in their original form after they fell into the hands of the Romans is the fact that each one was engraved with the name of one of the Jewish tribes, the inscription being probably in the older form of Hebrew writing, which was used in the coinage even as late as the last revolt in 137 A. D. Hence, recutting would have been necessary to fit them for use as ornaments, a process not easily accomplished, and involving a great loss of size. We must also bear in mind that the intrinsic value of the gems may not have been so great as many suppose, since all of them were probably of the less perfect forms of the precious and semi-precious varieties. It is very likely that the enthusiastic statements of Josephus in this connection were dictated by national pride, or arose from the tendency to exaggeration so common among the Oriental writers. Certainly, if the breastplate known to Josephus was made not long after the return of the Jews from the Babylonian Captivity, their financial resources at the time of its fabrication were quite restricted.

Admitting as a possibility that the Arabs may have secured possession of the breastplate, how would they have regarded it? The heroes of the Old Testament, and especially Moses, were such sacred personalities in the eyes of Mohammedans that this relic would have been as precious for them as for us. However, the victorious Arabs who overran the Sassanian Empire, although filled with religious zeal, were no students of Archaeology, and would have been quite unable to decipher the strange characters engraved on the stones. They would most probably have supposed them to be Persian characters, and would, therefore, have valued these stones no higher than others in the Persian treasure. This can serve as an explanation of



the fact that no allusion to the breastplate with its adornment can be found in the works of those Mohammedan writers, such as Tabari, who treat of the overthrow of the Sassanian Empire. We may be sure that the Persians themselves would have accorded no special honor to objects connected with the Hebrew religion, since their own Zoroastrian faith had no connection with it.

In 628, not long before the date of the Arab invasion, the most precious relic of Christendom, the cross discovered by Helena, mother of Constantine the Great, and believed to be the very cross on which Christ died, was surrendered to the Greek Emperor Heraclius by Kobad II, son of Khusrau II, on the conclusion of a treaty of peace between the Eastern and Sassanian Empires. This cross was one of the sacred objects borne away to Persia from Jerusalem by Khusrau in 615 A. D. It is said to have been guarded carefully through the influence of Sira, Khusrau's Christian wife. There is a bare possibility that other objects of religious veneration, taken from Jerusalem, may have been given up by the Persians at the same time, and that the unique character of the most important relic so overshadowed all others that historians have failed to note the fact. The cross was restored to Jerusalem by Heraclius in 629, only to fall into the hands of the Mohammedans when that city was taken by the Arabs under Omar, in 637. Hence, if the jewelled breastplate had also been surrendered by Kobad, it would probably have shared the same fate.

We have here a wide field for conjecture,—but, unfortunately, nothing more. Still, in the absence of any definite and trustworthy information, there is a kind of romantic interest in viewing the various possible relations of the mystery surrounding the fate of the most precious gems, historically at least, that have ever existed. More especially is this interest justified in the case of all who are disposed to prize gems and jewels for their symbolic significance, for, as we have shown, this significance, as far as concerns natal stones and the spiritual in-



terpretation of the qualities of the heart and soul symbolized by the color and character of the principal precious and semi-precious stones, has its root in the veneration felt by early Christian writers, beginning with the author of the Apocalypse, for the unforgotten and unforgettable gems that were worn by the Hebrew high-priest.

A rather ingenious utilization of the reputed powers of Aaron's breastplate comes to us in a book printed in Portland, Maine. The writer assumes that the Urim and Thummim enclosed in the folds of the breastplate consisted of twelve stones, duplicates of those engraved with the names of the tribes, and so disposed that, when they were shaken to and fro and then allowed to come to rest, three of them would become visible through an aperture in the ephod just beneath the rows of set stones. The signification of the oracle is given by the various combinations of color offered by the three stones that reveal themselves; to each combination a pre-arranged meaning is given. That anything of the kind could have been true of the original Urim and Thummim is scarcely worthy the trouble of refutation, but the practical result of this modern experiment is a clever oracle which will probably enjoy a certain vogue.

For those who, with the late lamented Lieutenant Totten, see in the tribes of Manasseh and Ephraim the Anglo-Saxons of England and the United States, and who look upon George V as the king who sits upon the throne of David, these symbolical stones of the breastplate acquire an added significance. While not pretending to be able to follow all the intricate and certainly most ingenious and interesting speculations of this school of Biblical exegesis, we cannot help expressing some astonishment that Ephraim should be thought to pre-figure England and Manasseh the United States, instead of vice versa. In Gen. xlviii, 17-20, the text more especially referred to in these speculations, Jacob's blessing is bestowed upon Ephraim, in spite of Joseph's protest that it should go to the eldest son, Manasseh. To this protest Jacob



answers: "I know it, my son, I know it: he also [Manasseh] shall become a people, and he also shall be great: but truly his younger brother shall be greater than he, and his seed shall become a multitude of nations." Certainly the very composite population of the United States perfectly merits this description. As a general rule, the Hebrews, when using the names Ephraim and Manasseh as tribal designations, maintained the twelve-fold division of the people, by substituting these tribes for Joseph and by dropping the name of Levi from the list, the tribe of Levi being assigned as priests to the care of the sanctuary, and not participating in the division of the Land of Promise.

In the Midrash Bemidbar, the Rabbinical commentary on Numbers, the tribes are given in their order, with the stone appropriate to each and the color of the tribal standard pitched in the desert camp, this color corresponding in each case with that of the tribal stone. This list represents a tradition dating back to at least the twelfth century and possibly much earlier than that; hence its value should not be underestimated, although we may not accept it without some reserves.

Odem	Reuben	Red
Pitdah	Simeon	Green
Bareketh	Levi	White, black and red
Jophek	Judah	Sky-blue
Sappir	Issachar	Black (like stibium)
Yahalom	Zebulum	White
Leshem	Dan	Sapphire-color
Shebo	Gad	Gray
Ahlahmah	Naphtali	Wine-color
Tarshish	Assher	Pearl-color (?)
Shoham	Joseph	Very black
Yashpheh	Benjamin	Colors of all the stones

In the attempt to determine the identity of the stones enumerated in Exodus xxviii and xxxix, as adorning the breastplate of the high-priest, we must bear in mind that this "breastplate of Aaron"



and the one described by Josephus, and brought by Titus to Rome after the capture of Jerusalem in 70 A. D., are in all probability entirely distinct objects. The former, if it ever existed, except in the ideal world of the authors of the Priestly Codex, must have been composed of the stones known to and used by the Egyptians of the thirteenth or fourteenth century, B. C., some of them being, perhaps, set in the "jewels of gold and jewels of silver" borrowed by the Israelites from the Egyptians just before the Exodus; on the other hand, the most trustworthy indications regarding the stones of the breastplate of the Second Temple, made perhaps in the fifth century, B. C., should be sought in the early Greek and Latin versions of the Old Testament, and in the treatise on precious stones by Theophrastus, who wrote about 300 B. C. The Natural History of Pliny, that great storehouse of ancient knowledge, and other early writers, may also be used with profit.

The stones of the breastplate are given in Revelation as the foundation stones of the New Jerusalem. "And there came one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls, who were laden with the seven last plagues; and he spake with me, saying, Come hither, I will show thee the bride, the wife of the Lamb. And he carried me away in the Spirit to a mountain great and high, and showed me the holy city Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, having the glory of God: her light was like unto a stone most precious, as it were a jasper stone, clear as crystal: having a wall great and high; having twelve gates, and at the gates twelve angels; and names written thereon, which are the **names** of the twelve tribes of the children of Israel: on the east were three gates; and on the north three gates; and on the south three gates; and on the west three gates. And the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them twelve



names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb. And he that spake with me had for a measure a golden reed to measure the city, and the gates thereof, and the wall thereof. And the city lieth foresquare, and the length thereof is as great as the breadth: and he measured the city with the reed, twelve thousand furlongs: the length and the breadth and the height thereof are equal. And he measured the wall thereof, a hundred and forty and four cubits, according to the measure of a man, that is, of an angel. And the building of the wall thereof was jasper: and the city was pure gold, like unto pure glass. The foundations of the wall of the city were adorned with all manner of precious stones. The first foundation was jasper; the second, sapphire; the third, chalcedony; the fourth, emerald; the fifth, sardonyx; the sixth, sardius; the seventh, chrysolite; the eighth, beryl; the ninth, topaz; the tenth, chrysoprase; the eleventh, jacinth; the twelfth, amethyst. And the twelve gates were twelve pearls; each one of the several gates was of one pearl: and the street of the city was pure gold, as it were transparent glass."

In Revelation 4:2-3, is another reference to precious stones in the heavenly city:

Straightway I was in the Spirit: and behold, there was a throne set in heaven, and one sitting upon the throne; and he that sat was to look upon like a jasper stone and a sardius: and there was a rainbow round about the throne, like an emerald to look upon.

Kunz says of this:

The commentators, both ancient and modern, have given different explanations of the symbolic meaning of the similes employed here. Some have seen in the two stones a type of the two judgments of the world, by fire and by water; others find that



they signify the holiness of God and his justice. Of the rainbow "like unto an emerald," Alford says we should not think it strange that the bow is green, instead of prismatic: "the form is that of the covenant bow, the color even more refreshing and more directly symbolizing grace and mercy."

The foundation stones of Revelation are thus foretold in Isaiah 54:11-12:

O thou afflicted, tossed with tempest, and not comforted, behold, I will set thy stones in fair colors, and lay thy foundations with sapphires. And I will make thy pinnacles of rubies, and thy gates of carbuncles, and all thy border of precious stones.

Commenting on this Kunz says:

As we see, only three stones are mentioned by name: the sapphire, the carbuncle, and "agates." This last rendering is quite doubtful, as the Hebrew word (kodkodim) signifies shining or gleaming stones, and their use for windows indicates that they must have been transparent. It is easy to understand that in later times the twelve stones of the breastplate, dedicated to the twelve tribes of Israel, were used to fill out and complete the picture, following the indication given by the general terms "stones with fair colours" and "pleasant stones."

As Royal Arch Masons we may see in the sardius or ruby, a symbol of our victorious struggle to find the word, its red hue the inextinguishable flame which burns within our soul, like the Burning Bush, it represents the flame which enlightens the seeker, but does not consume that on which it feeds.

In the topaz or chrysolite we may see the spiritual life of the seeker which is restrained by no obstacles; in the carbuncle, the zeal which should actuate him in the prosecution of the great and glorious work he has undertaken; in the emerald the strength of his faith in his success; in the sap-



phire, the height of celestial hope, for it symbolized divine favor; in the diamond, the downfall of those who oppose his efforts, for they shall be smitten to their own destruction; in the ligure, or jacinth, the prudence he should exercise on all occasions; in the agate, he is warned against intolerance, for it teaches him to win by persuasion rather than by violence; in the amethyst, which symbolizes the heavenly kingdom in humble souls, he is taught to banish evil thoughts, subdue his passions, cultivate his mind, and be true to himself, his fellow and his God, even unto death. The beryl teaches him that in the prosecution of his search for the Word he is sure to succeed, for it symbolizes that its wearer is unconquerable. The onyx teaches him that through strife and discord the Word is now lost, but like Joseph, whose name was inscribed on this stone, it will be restored through his untiring search. Lastly, the jasper, which symbolizes the truth he is seeking teaches him that, though for a time it may be lost, the Word is immortal and like the evergreen jasper, and will be found by him who seeks it faithfully and in the proper spirit.

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